Contact Centre Operational Relationships

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Summary of findings from qualitative field research conducted at Call Centre Expo 2008

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Introduction

In discussions with several organisations during the course of 2008, we began to see a recurring theme in respect of contact centres and their relationship with other parts of the business.

Whilst the companies we spoke to were exploiting advanced contact centre management technology to ensure intra-day performance was optimised, there was growing concern that the operational processes that link other parts of the customer delivery chain to the contact centre (and vice versa) were not always working well. Two examples illustrate what we found:

- a domestic central heating servicing business was concerned that the occasions on which a field service engineer could not complete repairs due to wrong or incomplete parts was increasing. On the face of it, everything was working as it should be. The contact centre was operating within its performance criteria and sufficient field engineers were available.

  The problem was that efforts to increase contact centre productivity had led to reduced targets for call duration. As a consequence, agents had become more focused on meeting target call times rather than gathering all the information needed to ensure service engineers arrived fully equipped to undertake the work.

  It proved to be a false economy since overall operational costs had risen due to the need for repeat engineer visits; increasing backlogs of work; increasing call volumes from customers re-booking appointments; and a rise in customer complaints. Not to mention the hidden costs of damaged customer relationships.

- A credit card outsourcer operated extensive contact centre facilities in the UK and offshore. Sophisticated intra-day management systems helped operational management keep track of productivity and performance on an agent by agent basis.

  At the same time, account management teams in Marketing were working with their corporate customers to develop specific campaigns to stimulate card usage. Some of these initiatives resulted in call volume increases. Account managers provided some information about campaign plans to the contact centre, but this was not in a common format and in many cases left centre management guessing as to the potential impact on volumes and call types.

  The absence of scenario planning capability that bridged the gap in the end-to-end planning process between marketing and the contact centre meant that operational managers did not have a clear and dynamic view of the impact on customer service operations. In particular, they could not overlay planned campaigns on their resource requirements in sufficient detail to know whether concurrent campaigns risked a negative impact on their service level agreements. Day to day they were hoping for the best.

As we prepared for Call Centre Expo 2008, we questioned whether these were isolated cases, or whether there was a systemic problem in the way in which contact centres integrate with other parts of the organisation. To find out, we conducted a simple qualitative research exercise during the course of the exhibition. These are the findings.

Our objective

Our objective was to develop a qualitative feel for the operational relationship between contact centres and other departments that also contribute to an end-to-end customer experience.

To achieve this, we invited visitors to our Call Centre Expo stand to think about their other organisational relationships and to use fridge magnets to indicate whether they were ‘Friends’ or a ‘Foe’ of the contact centre using a large graphic panel as shown below.

In other words, did these departments make it easier or more difficult to run the contact centre effectively?

To keep the exercise manageable, we narrowed the organisational relationships down to six areas: sales; marketing; operations; production; distribution; and field service.

Despite the inevitable limitations of conducting a research exercise in this way at an exhibition, we nevertheless found consistent themes emerging. As businesses continue to move through a period of intense economic turbulence the findings point to the need to ensure that cross-business operations are performing as well as they possibly can.

Part of the solution is to identify and reduce the ‘effort-leakage’ brought about by disconnected departments and contradictory objectives. We offer some perspectives on this at the end of this brief paper.

Findings

The findings are governed to some extent by the nature of the people we spoke to and the types of organisation they represented. Although all respondents had direct experience of interacting with sales, marketing and operations, fewer had direct experience of production and distribution environments. However, sufficient people were able to offer a point of view in these areas to indicate whether or not potential problems exist.

Overall, contact centres appeared to have more difficult relationships with sales, marketing and field service departments than with operations, production and distribution. The main reasons given offered few surprises, for example:

- Poor communication
- Weak forecasting
- No integrated campaign planning – especially operational impact assessment
- Promises to customers disconnected from operational capability
- Field service not managing customer expectations
- Incomplete or faulty on-site work

There are two striking things about these issues:

- they are not new; and
- massive investment in business intelligence and management information systems appears to have had little or no impact at the level of operational processes.

Implications

In many organisations the overall customer experience is delivered through multiple touchpoints. At the very least, businesses need to design the end-to-end mechanisms for delivery consciously and manage their performance actively to ensure that the customer's experience is coherent and appropriate. At a more sophisticated level, organisations need to manage the interfaces between departments and the dependencies they have on each other with higher levels of focus than appears to be the case.

Part of the answer is to enable greater visibility of cause and effect in a way that engages all the departments involved in finding the most effective solution for both customers and the business. However, without appropriate business intelligence this is easier said than done.

But what does 'appropriate business intelligence' mean in this context?

Fundamentally, it means intelligence that helps focus management action to repair or improve operational delivery processes. Where customer delivery requires multiple interactions across departmental or divisional boundaries, business intelligence should help managers in each area understand the consequences of actions in their own area on the performance of the whole delivery system.

Setting revised targets for shorter call durations may create an illusion of reduced cost in the contact centre, but if an external consequence is greater inefficiency and rising cost elsewhere it serves no useful organisational purpose.

For business intelligence and management information solutions, it means structuring performance reporting around how the end-to-end business system works rather than relying on large volumes of fragmentary data that mean little in isolation. The results need to be more transparent and available to the managers accountable for each part of the process. This not only improves communication between the links in the process chain but also ensures that the impact of decisions taken at each stage in the process is understood.

If a business intelligence application with scenario planning capability had been available in the home heating example it is unlikely that a decision would have been taken to reduce target call durations since the consequential impact on cost and customer satisfaction would have been more visible.